The geographical differences in the rate at which Victorian students participate in higher education.

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The views expressed are my own and do not purport to be the views of La Trobe University
This submission particularly addresses the need for new strategies to address barriers to overcoming or at least reducing the geographic differences in participation in higher education. This submission suggests that we need a major rethink on how we plan and provide higher education across the State.

In contrast to Britain and North America Australia has developed a higher education delivery system that is highly centred on its major metropolitan areas. Not only are there few Universities outside the major cities in Australia and particularly in Victoria, in contrast to NSW and Queensland, which are the other states with large regional populations, but the University presence that is in this state’s regional areas could be described as ad hoc in its distribution, token in its facilities and second rate in the perception of many people.

Reflecting on the situation in Britain it is notable that the original concept of a University was to locate it outside the larger cities in small town settings with Oxford and Cambridge being the most notable examples. It was the 1800s before a University was established in London. While a network of large Universities has now been established in the major cities across the UK there are numerous universities found in smaller regional settings.

Such a pattern is much more pronounced in North America where an ‘anti city’ bias emerged in the location and distribution of Universities. Land grant universities were popular and are the basis of a widely dispersed network of large universities in small regional centres, with many large (20,000 plus students) campuses located in cities of well under 100,000 people. Even world renowned universities are not in the centre of large cities or in their suburbs. Universities such as Harvard and Stanford were originally established in rural areas or small towns. Similarly numerous major universities in Canada such as Waterloo, Queens, and Guelph are located in cities of around 100,000 while others are even more dispersed. New Zealand also provides a useful model. It has large world class universities located in relatively small cities such Dunedin and Palmerston North. In these examples universities are major elements of the regional economy and provide strong cultural and intellectual life in the cities in which the universities are located.

In both the US, Canada and New Zealand higher education has been taken to the people, used as a regional development force and increased the liveability and competitiveness of many regional areas and regional cities. In contrast Australia and Victoria have either consciously or by unthinking policy used the location of new universities and the growth of existing universities as means to reinforce the centrality of population and unconsciously disadvantaged regional residents. Universities in Melbourne compete for limited land, pay high prices for property and increase traffic congestion. Regional campuses compete in a market where they start from well behind in terms of status and
perceived quality because of the historical concentration of Universities as an urban enterprise.

Victoria’s situation with regional universities and campuses of metropolitan universities provides an interesting comparison with other states in Australia. New South Wales has stand-alone regional universities at Newcastle, Wollongong, Charles Sturt (Wagga and Albury), Southern Cross (Lismore), New England (Armidale). Queensland has stand-alone regional universities at James Cook (Townsville and Cairns), Central Queensland (Rockhampton and other campuses), Southern Queensland (Toowoomba) (I have ignored arrangements at the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast).

In contrast Victoria has a stand-alone university at Ballarat and also the Australian Catholic University at Ballarat. The rest are campuses of Melbourne universities. Geelong and Warrnambool – Deakin. While Deakin would probably dispute it Deakin at Geelong is as accessible to Melbourne residents as the Monash campus at Berwick. Gippsland Churchill - Monash. Bendigo, Wodonga, Mildura and Shepparton - La Trobe.

In contrast the regional Universities in the other states are generally much larger and some are competitive with metropolitan universities in terms if the number of students and the range and depth of programs offered.

The full set of arrangements in Victoria is

- Ballarat University: Campuses at Ballarat, Ararat, Horsham & Stawell
- La Trobe University: Campuses at Bendigo, Mildura, Wodonga, Shepparton, Beechworth
- Deakin University: Campuses at Geelong & Warrnambool
- Monash University: Campus at Churchill (Latrobe Valley)
- RMIT University: Campuses at Hamilton & East Gippsland
- Melbourne University: Institute of Land Resources (at Dookie, Longerenong, Glenormiston, Warragul, Werribee & Creswick) & Shepparton
- Australian Catholic University: Ballarat

On my calculations there are about 25,000 students enrolled at regional University campuses in Victoria but with about almost half that number at the Deakin Geelong campus. That leaves about 15,000 enrolled in the other campuses. There is an interesting comparison that can be made between South Australia and Victoria. Victoria has more people living in regional Victoria than live in the whole of South Australia. Adelaide supports three major universities with a total student population of about 70,000. Is it any wonder that participation rates of students, both school leavers and mature age students in and from regional Victoria are well below the rate of metropolitan students? One of the major burdens experienced by regional families is financially supporting students at metropolitan universities.

Of course the provision of actual student enrolments is a Commonwealth issue and funds for buildings largely come from the federal government. But the legislative structure for the establishment of higher education and the approval of new universities is very much a
State matter. The current provision of higher education across rural and regional Victoria presents as a pattern of differing arrangements and levels of provision. The structure of provision owes much to the historical development of higher education across rural and regional Victoria and a series of administrative arrangements between Melbourne universities and regional institutions, particularly following the Dawkins white paper at the federal level some fifteen years ago.

Historically, the level of participation and the number of university student places (basically dictated by Federal Government funding arrangements and restrictions) per head of population across regional is low compared with metropolitan Melbourne. These arrangements are historical rather than a systematic plan to meet regional needs. There is no accepted measure to rate or objectively to evaluate the appropriateness of Victoria’s regional university provision.

It is against this background of the historical development of universities and campuses – in some cases evolving from former TAFE Colleges, Teachers Colleges and Colleges of Advanced Education, that regional communities have been provided with uneven and sporadic access to higher education and to differing arrangements of programs. It is hardly the basis upon which the State can move forward.

At the regional, community and business level there is often a strong working arrangement between groups such as local governments, leading businesses, government departments and agencies and the university campuses and their research arm. However, again this is not based on any systematic structured process where there is a consistent line of communication or liaison.

Considerable potential for strengthening development initiatives and capacity could be gained from a more structured approach to linking regional universities at the regional level with bodies active and responsible for regional development. The overall constraint to further the capacity for regional universities to be a stimulus for regional development and the potential for regions to capitalise on that is that there is no structured approach to the issue, initiatives are voluntary and there is no clear incentive for the relevant parties to systematically address the issue.

I urge the Inquiry to raise the whole issue of how over a million Victorians are to obtain convenient access to higher education. Why is it being further centralized? Ask yourself the question, if there was no university education in Victoria, how would it be planned and provided against the criteria of enhancing liveability and competitiveness – I suggest that the model of provision would look nothing like what we currently have. Locations would be more strategic, equitable and accessible. We would seriously look at the overseas models to use higher education provision to stimulate regional development and provide a wider range of experiences for students.

Unless we are prepared to systematically tackle the inequities and inadequacies in the current arrangements it will not be possible to seriously get to one of the major root causes of the problem the Committee is examining. The Victorian government needs to
develop a systematic strategy to use the provision of higher education throughout the State to better balance the distribution of population, to provide greater levels of access to higher education and to use the regional provision of higher education as a means of stimulating and supporting regional development. The implementation of a systematic program to develop a series of regional universities along the lines of the North American or New Zealand model would produce a series of advantages to the whole State. The concentration of population in Melbourne has distorted the view of how University education is to be delivered. Unless this State can shift itself from this mode of thinking we are condemned to repeat the past of inequitable levels of participation. We need to systematically redirect new university places to selected locations across regional Victoria. Over time this strategy will raise participation levels and it will have a series of other flow-on benefits.

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18 March 2008